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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that the current division between reading and writing instruction for Chinese English as a Second Language (ESL) students, the lack of authentic communication that typically exists in ESL contexts, and difficulties with sequencing teaching-learning activities combine to hinder the development of writing skills. The paper suggests that writing teachers must understand that there is much more involved in writing than the final copy turned in by students. It recommends integrating reading and writing in ESL education, noting that reading and writing are interactive. Writing teachers must move beyond giving students a topic to write on and then grading the final product. They must include plenty of process work, from reading to writing, so students will progress from reading, to discussing and analyzing, to writing. Writing instruction is effective when contextualized through background reading related to real-life interests. This allows students to understand the purpose of the relationship between reading and writing. This integration allows educators to teach more effectively by dealing with reading and writing simultaneously and students to write more effectively in an authentic context. Reading strategies that students learn early in the process will become part of their writing strategies later on. (Contains 15 references.) (SM)

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INTEGRATING READING AND WRITING IN EFL COMPOSITION IN CHINA

A paper presented at the annual meeting of the
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Introduction: EFL composition pedagogy in China today

Because over 20 million Chinese students are learning English today, it is well worth reflecting on ways to assure that their experience is as successful as possible. At present, these students' weakest communicative skill in English is writing. In the past three years the average score for the writing section on the nationwide College English Test (second-year university level) is 7-8 out of 15, and half of the students actually failed this part; in response to this result, the National Examination Committee for the test has ruled that those who fail in the writing section cannot pass the exam as a whole, even if they attain a pass with regard to the total score. This regulation aims to motivate students to improve their writing. However, apart from such administrative measures, it is also interesting to consider pedagogical innovations that might contribute to improved success with writing as well.

A survey of English teaching practice at the university level in China reveals a number of traditional strategies that could be reconsidered. It is probable that the present-day division between the teaching of reading and writing, the lack of authentic communication needs that typically exists in any EFL context, and difficulties with the sequencing of teaching-learning activities combine to hinder the development of writing skills. At present, it is a common practice for Chinese teachers to teach reading and foreign teachers teaching writing. There are certain advantages to this division because foreign teachers are believed to be superior to non-native teachers in terms of language and rhetoric. However, the disadvantages are apparent, too. This division prevents the students from being able to profit from a pedagogical movement from reading to writing: that is, the knowledge and skills students have acquired in reading cannot be transferred to writing, which means that each time students start a writing assignment they experience much difficulty in both language and rhetoric. Moreover, in the EFL context, students have no immediate communicative needs, such as writing letters, resumes, or assignments for different subjects in English. Additionally, their teachers, driven by a test-oriented approach, tend to give students written assignments on topic areas that instructors think will be useful in the sense that they might be tested. In fact, those artificial topics and decontextualized exercises may not interest either teachers or students. Writing is seen by both parties merely as an academic task to be completed, and so it is reduced to just a part of their pre-test training. The usual teaching sequence for EFL writing will begin with an example paragraph that displays a particular writing skill, (i.e. cause and effect organization), will then assign a topic for students to write, and will end with the teachers' grade and simple comments and error correction (mostly regarding grammar). As a result, the students have difficulty not only in finding and developing ideas, but also in deciding on the best way to express those ideas in the new language. When they write essay tests, the students have an even harder time in presenting their ideas clearly and logically. According to Covey's observation, Chinese students have two problems in writing: "they are worried that they have nothing to say; but if they have something to say they are worried that what they have said will not be understood" (Covey, 1983: 5). A teacher in Covey's study commented that the students were marked down for "lack of development but the students just cannot think of anything to say", so that examiners concluded their writing was "long, general, rambling and imprecise"(Covey, 1983:2) and that they lacked or ignored world knowledge on geography, politics and economics etc.(Covey, 1983: 4).

There are several reasons for this situation. With respect to content, Chinese students are very often worried about whether their ideas can be culturally accepted. Regarding form, they are worried about rhetorical appropriateness. Influenced by traditional Chinese writing, they tend to repeat some words or phrases and use short T-units. Chinese is considered to be a paratactic language and has less use of connectors; also the love of parallelism is still evident in much contemporary Chinese writing and may emerge in these students' English writing as repetition, which will be negatively evaluated as being verbose (Kirkpatrick, 1997). Finally, these problems with writing are also influenced by the rigid test

format that students usually encounter. Generally, they are asked to write three paragraphs for any test because of time limitations. In keeping with this constraint, students are trained to compose three-paragraph essays in writing class. Moreover, when they write, instead of consulting some relevant materials first, Chinese EFL students rush to a bilingual dictionary to find the seemingly 'equivalent' words and try inexpertly to translate their ideas into English. Thus, they clothe their native-language expressions and structures in English words without realizing that their inexact and misleading words will often be incomprehensible in the context: some words and expressions they choose from the dictionary will be poorly understood or insufficiently controlled in the context. For example, we find such awkward sentences as, "I would like to set up a party to see somebody off in my apartment" in an invitation letter, or "Canada education is different with Chinese education, like timing, teachers and going to university" (actual samples from student compositions). Despite seeming to be grammatically correct, they are not acceptable English. At the same time, teachers see their responsibility as being to respond "to the finished product only. The teacher can only judge and evaluate, not influence the piece of writing" (Raimes, 1983:139). Such writing class is heavily goal-oriented rather than process-oriented. This leads to the result that students lack systematic training in the writing process: planning, gathering information, drafting, revising, editing or proof-reading. Only if the curriculum changes and these writing teachers accept the notion that there is much more involved in writing than the final copy that a student turns in, so that they shift from a goal-oriented to a process-oriented approach, can positive changes be expected.

Interaction of reading and writing

Integrating reading and writing is not a new idea. It is a commonplace that none of the four communication skills – listening speaking, reading and writing – can be learned alone. Reading is closely related to writing in that writing, as a productive skill, cannot happen without reading; reading exerts a strong influence on writing. On the other hand, writing activities, such as taking notes, outlining and summarizing, can also improve reading comprehension. A number of studies have shown that reading and writing are interactive. Stotsky (1983) noted that better writers tend to be better readers, so that providing reading experiences in place of grammar study or additional writing practice was as beneficial as, or more beneficial than grammar study or extra writing practice. Krashen (1984) stressed the idea that reading exercises and progress in writing are interdependent by comparing the effect on writing skills of writing with reading exercises as opposed to practice only in writing. Based on his idea, Hornung (2000:134) concluded that it is logical to integrate reading in the teaching writing . And Qualley (1993:114) further illustrated that idea: "when students experience active reading in conjunction with their own writing, a transference from one process to the other is more likely to occur." If students read more about what they will write – discussing and analyzing – they will develop many ideas for writing, so that reading will benefit writing. Still, some students, even with lots of reading experience, continue to have difficulty in writing; they need instruction based on form and content analysis of the reading passages, so as to approach writing more effectively. In this context, the writing process will become a process of discovering new ideas and new language forms to express those ideas (Raimes 1983:11). In particular we should note that Chinese students are reported to show a stronger correlation between L2 reading and writing abilities than some others (Carson et al. : 1990). Therefore, introducing a reading element into the EFL composition classroom by adopting a process approach will cast some light on effective and efficient teaching of writing in terms of the way in which teachers intervene in the process of students' writing.

Reading-writing connection in a process-oriented approach

More than giving students a topic to write on and then grading the products, writing teachers need to include plenty of process work – from reading to writing – so students will progress from reading, to discussing and analyzing, and finally to actually writing. The emphasis will be put on each learner's process of developing a text. This will make a big change. In the traditional process of teaching writing, "the teacher's response is to the finished product only. The teacher can only judge and evaluate, not influence the piece of writing. Responding to a paper only at the end limits us to doing the following: 1. giving the paper a grade (A, B, C or 70, 80, 90, etc.); 2. making comments: very good, needs improvement, careless; or 3. correcting errors" (Raimes, 1983: 139). But moving to the process approach will offer "a process of discovery for students: discovery of new ideas and new language forms to express those ideas" (Raimes, 1983: 11). For teachers, it will free instruction from:

- The three or five paragraph model;
- Simplistic assumptions about the organization and ordering of information;
- The typical one-draft writing assignment;
- The assumption that each student should be working alone, or only with the instructor on summative feedback;
- Reliance on grammar/usage handbooks and lectures;
- The linear composing model based on outlining, writing, and editing;
- Free instructors from imposed, artificial topics for writing.

Grab& Kaplan (1996: 86)

These changes, as proposed by Grab&Kaplan, may seem to entail a wholly positive innovation, allowing teachers and students to have more meaningful interaction and more purposeful reading to writing. Such are the typical claims made for the process approach and, certainly, there is the potential for great value. Nonetheless, adopting the process approach will effect profound changes in the teaching and learning situation that may also be perceived as difficult or disruptive, despite the promise of good pedagogical consequences.

Proposal: An integration in a process-oriented approach

Writing instruction can be effective when it is contextualized through background reading related to real-life interests, so that students understand the purpose of the relationship between reading and writing. Reading in order to compose is valuable because in real life different goals shape different reading processes and having a goal tends to increase reading efficiency. However, the reading-to-compose process works best when students are instructed in how to do it. Students need to work with texts under teachers' instruction, being exposed to different genres and topic areas, thinking about what they have read, forming preliminary ideas of their own, sifting through those ideas, and then finally beginning to organize them for writing: clustering, outlining, drafting, redrafting, revising, proofreading or editing. All of these aspects of a writing lesson help students develop their writing skills (Campbell 1983 :13). Instruction in the writing process and in reading comprehension can be combined because they are similar in many ways: both focus on helping students to think. Focussing on thinking rather than on simply getting the right answer is helpful to both reading and writing (Maria 1990: 222). Students' decisions about the selection, organization and connection of ideas, which occur during the reading phase, may become the blueprint for what the student will write (Flower 1990:147). Thus, we can see that, for a number of reasons, it is more effective to teach reading and writing together that separately, as is at present often the case in China.

As stated above, the writing process includes planning, gathering information, drafting, revising and editing. First of all, writing teachers have to find enough interesting topics for students to write. Providing authentic materials for students to read is one way to promote students' interests and generate topics on which to write something of genuine interest to the composer, thus satisfying the need and desire to engage in real communication, which will motivate effective learning. Experience suggests that students respond more positively to genuine materials than to carefully chosen but out-of-date information in textbooks. Teachers usually have easy access to newspapers, magazines, TV or the Internet, where they can choose materials in interesting topic areas that are relevant to their students' needs, experience and concerns. Students will learn well when connections are made between their schoolwork and the outside world.

Second, having reading texts available as background sources for writing help students most then they have directions from their teachers on how to understand the material completely, so that they can feel confident about finding something to say. This is very important for low and intermediate level students because they lack control over the materials they are asked to consult. In interviews I made with some students in China and Canada, they complained that they borrowed a lot of books from the library but they could not understand. Even though they could comprehend, they would only get the content, without regard for the formal features, and so they admitted that they were only able to pick up isolated words and expressions; they actually ignored sentence and text structure. As a result, reading assignments can turn out to be an inefficient activity if writing teachers just ask students to consult material, without providing them with any instruction; so, it is advisable for teachers to select materials according to the language abilities of students. Introducing reading materials in writing class and giving students reading instruction on them will assist learners in gathering information to support, develop and generate new ideas; at the same time, they may extend their lexical and syntactical repertoire by imitation or copying. On the local level, they can imitate the words, phrases, idioms, discourse markers or sentences they have read and understood; on the global level, they may imitate some elements of the content, sentence structure, organization or style. At first, copying or imitation will increase their security in using the foreign language. In order for students to benefit and progress to the next stage, the teachers need to instruct them and engage in discussion of the various possible ways to imitate constructively (Hornung 2000: 137). For example, in a recent copy of the St. Catharines *Standard* we find debate about whether to preserve certain downtown buildings for their heritage value, or destroy them to make way for commercial development, and we read such stirring comments as: "The heritage value is far in excess of the commercial value they are looking at" ... They [the buildings] represent the continuum of history" (*Standard*, Mar. 6, 2002: A3) ... "We should not sacrifice our past in the name of progress" (*Standard*, Mar. 6, 2002: A5) ... "Heritage provides familiarity and is essential to our mental health and our quality of life... what kind of legacy are we going to leave to our children?" (*Standard*, Mar, 11, 2002: A3).

Preserving a society's cultural legacy is a universal topic, and we will find some universal ideas expressed very vividly in quoted phrases, which characterize this material. Students can use some of these arguments – taking either a pro or a con position – in their own writing on that topic. They can generate their own ideas based on the powerful and exciting arguments they have read. Furthermore, in classroom discussion of the material, students can be guided to reflect on how newspaper writers reinforce their ideas in different ways: for instance, in the quoted statements, we see both rhetorical questions and strongly emotional statements. Also, students can be encouraged to ask themselves whether they agree with the idea in the newspaper, why or why not, etc. Then, when students are asked to write on a similar topic, it may be most effective for teachers to make the assignment a guided writing activity by underlining some parts of the newspaper article – a topic sentence, the conclusion or

perhaps the rhetorical question (above) – as a focus for writing. Furthermore, as Maria (1990:224) suggests, teachers can provide vocabulary instruction related to the understanding of main ideas by pointing out situations where context is helpful, and by modeling the thinking processes involved in making effective use of context. Also, instruction in sentence structure that provide students with an ability to understand and express themselves in complex sentence patterns, and instruction in text structures, will make them aware of the importance of textual organization and the different ways in which a text can be organized. In addition, the teacher may help students distinguish between ideas that embody universal values as opposed to those which seem to be more cultural-bound. This is important because it can avoid cultural conflicts when writing.

Third, developing reading comprehension strategies through specific instruction will help student solve problems in their writing. Involving students in critical reading will help them think about how other writers arouse their readers' interest effectively. Asking students questions about texts that others have written can help them be more alert to what they themselves write. Looking for cues that help students make predictions about texts by others will help them see the importance of providing these cues in their own texts, and so on (Maria, 1990:22). All techniques related to reading closely and analyzing texts can help not only with critical reading but also with critical writing: students can be led to apply those skills to revising and editing their own writing. Discussing the difference between universal values and culture-specific ones may raise students' cultural awareness and increase their ability to address culturally embedded issue in an objective way. All of these reading-related activities also serve as pre-writing preparations. When students write their first draft, they may use texts they have read as models in many ways, on both the linguistic and the cultural/rhetoric levels, when they are asked to reproduce a similar piece or to bring their own writing through the various stages towards completion: planning, revising, and so forth. And in the revising stage, teachers should not hastily take over the job of correcting everything for students; instead, they should have conferences with students and suggest options for them to choose along with discussion of which would be best. For Chinese students, identifying general ideas and supporting details, sentence combining and use of cohesive devices will always be the focus at the revising stage. Finally, the students should edit their writing with a checklist. In this way they will be trained as better writers.

Advantages and disadvantages

Compared to our usual practice in China, there are a number of advantages to be derived from the reading-writing integration in a process-oriented approach. Through integration teachers will teach more efficiently by dealing with reading and writing at the same time. Additionally, students will write more effectively in an authentic context. By generating interesting topics in reading texts, students will be motivated to write; in other words, the writing activity will become contextualized and applicable to real life situations on account of its relationship with authentic sources. In this way, teachers and students alike will see writing not only a mere tool for testing English skills, but also as a means by which to satisfy the need for genuine communication. Through reading comprehension instruction, students may develop a capacity to manipulate reading texts and use them as a background source for writing. By moving from reading to writing, they focus not only on meaning but also on the connection of form and content by analyzing the discourse, structure and organization that they may imitate later. This type of writing process is manageable for both teachers and students. By intervening in the process starting with reading and then all the way along to writing, the teachers know exactly what the students' problems are and give them instructions accordingly. Also, students will be led step by step through the different stages of writing, so as to enhance their learning. The reading strategies they learn early in the process will become part of their writing strategies later on. And a heightened awareness of strategy-use

will improve students' cognitive development from reading to writing at different stages: monitoring, elaboration, structuring and planning (Flower et al. 1990:121).

Still, there may be disadvantages as well. Perhaps chief among these is the fact that integrating reading and writing will require teachers to devote more time and attention to planning a new curriculum, managing the reading-writing process, and conferencing with students. Especially with large classes (30 students or more), which are often encountered in Chinese universities, this approach can be quite time-consuming and laborious. However, the virtue of individual conferences is that a real discussion takes place, which is the only way to find out what a student really is trying to say (Raimes, 1983:145). To solve this problem, we may employ group work or we may try conferencing with students in turn. Also, the workload can be lightened by reducing the number of compositions produced, but students will still have a richer learning experience and be better trained through the process-writing approach than through the traditional approach with more writing but less hands-on experience. But we need to recognize that the present style of writing pedagogy has been practiced in China for a long time, and it is based on the cultural context and on a very reasonable assessment of the divergent language skills needed by reading and writing teachers. Thus, it will surely take time for Chinese teachers to change their ideas and adopt innovative methodology by introducing meaningful and manageable reading materials in writing classes in order to expand pre-writing activities and enter into conferences with students at the revision stage. In order to contribute to such developments most fruitfully, it would be desirable for foreign teachers working in China to have solid training in the contrastive rhetoric of Chinese and English language, and for them to be aware of the diverse educational traditions in different cultural settings.

Conclusion

Despite the potential difficulties, moving towards an integrated reading-plus-writing process approach would be very worthwhile in China. It is important to keep focussing on the positive potential: teachers who view writing as a process will be inclined to integrate reading and writing in ways that will open up new avenues towards effective writing instruction. Through experimenting with texts, students can learn about language and culture as well. Of course, the process will require a difficult effort in the area of curriculum redesign, and the pedagogy itself may seem to be more time-consuming and even more challenging. Moreover, bringing reading and writing together will call for a redefinition of the roles and responsibilities of teachers, and students themselves will need to adapt to a somewhat different style of in-class interaction. Nonetheless, teaching writing – like writing itself – is never an easy job; since the process of teaching and learning go together, moving towards the process approach will bring both teachers and students rich rewards.

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